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JOSEPH C. HARSCH

## Imperial problem

**G**UATEMALA has had an election which was notably honest. It was won by a civilian, Venicio Cerezo, 42, leader of the moderately conservative Christian Democratic Party. He is to be inaugurated Jan. 14. Washington has high hopes that the result will be domestic peace and an end to the worst civil rights record in Central America.

No one knows how many people have been killed for political reasons in Guatemala in our times. Recently a State Department official noted cheerfully that the rate of killings was down to a mere 30 non-combatants per month. He contrasted this with a killing rate of 300 a month in 1981. The figure of 50,000 in all since 1978 has been used.

Conditions in Guatemala have been so bad that Pope John Paul II, in July 1983, sent a special message to the then-president of Guatemala calling on him to halt further executions ordered by secret military courts. Six persons were executed just before the Pope's visit to Guatemala in March of that year.

Most killings — frequently involving mutilation or total disappearance — have not been done by secret courts, but rather by "death squads" of unidentifiable composition and motivation. Terror is commonplace among plain people all over the country.

This horror story dates from 1954. The most succinct account of how it started is given by Ray Cline, former deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency, in a book entitled "Secrets, Spies and Scholars" (Acropolis Books Ltd., 1976). Publication was cleared by the CIA. It says:

"President Arbenz Guzmán had expropriated the holdings of the powerful US-owned United Fruit Company and was discovered by the CIA to be about to receive a boatload of Czechoslovakian arms. This fact, publicized by the State Department on May 17, touched off a six-week crisis in which a rival Guatemalan political leader, Castillo Armas, launched a desultory invasion of Guatemala supported by three P-47 fighter planes of World War II vintage flying from friendly Nicaraguan territory. The aircraft were provided by CIA and flown by soldier-of-fortune pilots recruited by CIA. . . . There was not much fighting, but the P-47s created a lot of excitement, and support for Arbenz Guzmán crumbled. A junta took over, made an accommodation with Castillo Armas, and he became president in early July."

Ever since, Guatemala has had a succession of rigged elections, coups, revolutions, and counterrevolutions punctuated by waves of killings. Victims seem to have been mostly either native Indian peasants who tried to take advantage of land distribution or liberal students and teachers at schools and universities.

The other side of the coin is what might have happened had the CIA not intervened to overthrow the Arbenz Guzmán regime. It had communist backing. The arms, on their way when the CIA organized the coup, came from Czechoslovakia, hence presumably by Soviet motivation. Might Guatemala today be another Cuba?

It did not become a Cuba or a Nicaragua, but it did become a disgrace to the United States, and a continuing problem for the United States. The results make an unappealing advertisement for revolutions staged by the CIA.

The US in this case decreed that Guatemala must not have a left-leaning government obtaining arms from a communist country in Eastern Europe. But once having removed that regime, it left the place to run itself under a succession of military juntas. It enforced rightist rule on the country, but exercised no responsibility for the behavior of those who took over.

Is this any way to run what in earlier times would be called an empire? In the heyday of the British Empire, many a noncompliant regime was overthrown. But the British usually put in its place someone better, and then put a British official alongside to police the operation and keep it decent. They accepted responsibility for the consequences.

Perhaps the time has come for the US to accept responsibility for the consequences when it manages a coup against an uncooperative regime.